

Using
Bloom's Taxonomy to
Explore Literature

Levels of Understanding



Their Eyes Were Watching God

By Zora Neale Hurston

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Introduction to Levels of Understanding

FOR MANY STUDENTS, studying literature is like being lost in an alien universe, filled with hidden symbols, structures, and meanings that only a scholar can uncover. Without a teacher's direction, students lack the skills and confidence to evaluate a work of literature on their own, and instead, will frequently turn to resources such as the Internet for guidance. As a result, they assume another writer's views instead of developing their own.

Levels of Understanding breaks down complex questions students will encounter into smaller parts, showing the steps a critical reader should take in order to develop a sound evaluation of a text. Each section of the guide contains five types of questions representative of Bloom's learning domains—starting with the most basic and foundational skill, knowledge and comprehension, and gradually building to the highest skill, evaluation. All the way, reluctant students are provided with the scaffolding they need to advance from one level of understanding to the next.

The five types of questions, again, representative of Bloom's domains, are as follows:

- **Comprehension**—will ask the most basic questions to ascertain the students' fundamental understanding of the text: plot facts, character identification, etc.
- **Reader Response**—will ask the students to “respond” to the text by relating it to personal experience or by presenting an opinion on a character or event.
- **Analysis**—will require students to study how various techniques and literary or theatrical devices (diction, symbolism, imagery, metaphors, asides, soliloquies etc.) function in the text. Analysis questions do not ask the student to merely identify or define a literary, theatrical, or rhetorical device.
- **Synthesis**—will bridge the gap between the analysis and evaluation questions, requiring students to look at other scenes in the text and draw conclusions about themes, motifs, or a writer's style. Often, a synthesis question will require the student to draw on prior knowledge—what has been learned in class or through research—and/or information from sources other than the literary title being studied in order to arrive at a satisfactory answer.
- **Evaluation**—will ask the student to make a qualitative judgment on the text and determine whether a particular aspect of it is effective or ineffective.

Other books may list Bloom's taxonomy, define the terms, and offer a general example or two. *Levels of Understanding*, however, provides the teacher with the title-specific questions to allow you to effectively bring Bloom into your classroom.

In addition, unlike other available products that claim to address Bloom's “higher order thinking skills,” *Levels of Understanding* does not teach students how to answer questions about a particular text, but instead, helps them develop skills to evaluate literature critically and without guidance. These are skills that will not only help students prepare for standardized tests like the Advanced Placement Language and Literature exams, the SATs, and the ACTs, but will also give students the self-assurance to develop and articulate a personal view—a skill that will be highly advantageous to them in college.

This product, however, is not geared toward upper-level students only, but is a versatile guide that can be used for students of all ability levels—remedial through honors. The teacher may customize the product to fit the class's objectives and goals, determining which questions the students will answer. Additionally, the guide is entirely reproducible, and each major division begins on a new page, so you may use *Levels of Understanding* for the whole work of literature or only a specific section. ♡



How to Use this Unit

EACH *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* unit is intended to be a deep and rich component of your literature program, whether your goal is to prepare your students for a large-scale assessment like the AP Literature exam or to challenge your students to read carefully and to think deeply about what they have read.

The questions in this guide are designed to be flexible and meet your needs. They can be used as

- homework questions when students read the text independently.
- in-class reading check questions and “bell-ringer” journal entries.
- class discussion questions and prompts.
- focus questions for pre-writing and essay planning.
- review and study questions for assessment.

While the Teacher's Guide contains an answer key, you will find that the higher-order questions (especially synthesis and evaluation) have model answers that represent more than one possible response. It would be inappropriate to penalize a student whose well-reasoned and supportable answer did not match the “correct” answer in the guide.

For this reason, we strongly recommend that you view the questions in this guide as learning activities and not as assessment activities.

Many of your students are likely to find the higher domains new and perhaps intimidating. Others might be alarmed at having to support their reader-response reactions and their evaluations with an accurate comprehension of the text. The questions in this guide should act as both scaffolding and safety net, guiding your students through a new reading and thinking process and allowing them to practice without fear of “failure.”

The writing prompts, however, provide rich assessment and evaluation opportunities. Every prompt is designed to invite your students to operate in one of the higher order domains, thus giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability, and giving you the opportunity to evaluate their progress.

Whether you use *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* as the core of your literature curriculum or as a supplement, the guide and writing prompts are designed to help your students attain a deep understanding of the works they read. Ideally, they will gain the type of understanding demanded by Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and most state standards, including the Common Core State Standards of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. 🍷



Introduction to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

“Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.”—Zora Neale Hurston

TO CALL ZORA NEALE HURSTON a seminal figure in American literature and culture is to state the obvious; but when one studies her work and life, she also emerges as a paradox. She was culturally liberal and politically conservative; feminist and romantic; a charismatic, flamboyant and celebrated writer who reached the end of her life in obscurity and poverty. Novelist, dramatist, poet, folklorist, and anthropologist, she stands as one of the most complex and controversial writers of the Harlem Renaissance, with a diverse and prolific body of work.

Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, in 1891, but her family soon moved to Eatonville, Florida, the same town she depicts in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A rural community not far from Orlando, Eatonville was the first incorporated black township in the country, and as such, a bastion of black self-governance and achievement. Indeed, Zora’s father, John Hurston, formulated the town laws and ordinances, and ultimately became its mayor. Her mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, helped direct the curriculum at the Sunday School, but she was no straitlaced authoritarian. Indeed, she exhorted her children to “jump at de’ sun.” As Hurston later reflected, “We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.” This spirited and happy upbringing ended abruptly when Lucy died in 1904. Zora was only thirteen years old, and the sudden loss devastated her. Her father remarried quickly, choosing as his second wife a much younger woman. Zora took such an intense dislike to her new stepmother that she actually got into a fistfight with her—nearly killing the woman. Distracted by life with his new wife, John Hurston suddenly had little time and less money for his children, and Zora was soon exiled to a boarding school. When John and his wife stopped paying the tuition, she was expelled and forced to begin life on her own.

Zora worked at a number of menial jobs while struggling to finish her education. In 1917, at age 26, she came to Baltimore and shaved ten years off her age so she could qualify for free public schooling. She worked as a manicurist while attending Howard University, receiving an associate degree. While at Howard, she published her first short story in the campus literary magazine; she was also published in the magazine *Opportunity*, with her short story “Drenched in Light.” Another short story, “Spunk,” and a play, “Color Struck” both won second-place awards

in the same magazine’s literary contest. *Opportunity* then published “Spunk.” With her newfound renown, Hurston relocated to New York in 1925 and immediately claimed a role as part of the Harlem Renaissance, the black literary and cultural movement gaining prominence during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1934, Hurston’s first novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* was published and praised by the *New York Times* as “the most vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet been written by a member of the Negro race.” She also received a scholarship to Barnard College through the sponsorship of the school’s founder, Anne Nathan Meyer. Hurston later began graduate study in the field of anthropology with Franz Boas, a pioneer of modern anthropology, at Columbia University. An outspoken foe of racism, Boas had been the first to argue that non-white cultures were as worthy of anthropological study as any and that they should be studied on their own terms, setting himself against the prevailing ethnocentrism of the discipline at that time. He also championed the study of folklore, which had a profound impact on Hurston’s work, both as an anthropologist and as an author. With Boas’s help, she received a six-month grant to study and document African-American folklore. This research led to her book on African and African-American folklore, *Mules and Men*, published to wide acclaim in 1935. She subsequently received a Guggenheim grant, which she used to travel to Haiti and Jamaica to study more folklore. It was while she was in Haiti that she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—in seven weeks.

Despite the academic acclaim she had garnered, the Harlem Renaissance did not extend a universally warm welcome to Zora Neale Hurston. Her lyricism, folkloric motifs, concentration on personal rather than political themes, and especially her use of dialect put her in direct opposition to both the influential black critic and scholar Alain Locke, and the best known and most prominent black novelist of the time, Richard Wright, the author of *Native Son*. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* became a lightning rod for criticism at its publication, and Wright was especially excoriating:

The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint,’ the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race.

Levels of Understanding:

Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains
to explore Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Writing Prompts

Chapter 1: Analysis, Evaluation:

Toward the end of the chapter, Janie says to Phoeby:

"To start off wid, people like dem wastes up too much time puttin' they mouf on things they don't know nothin' about. Now they got to look into me loving Tea Cake and see whether it was done right or not! They don't know if life is a mess of corn meal dumplings, and if love is a bed-quilt!"

In a well-organized essay, analyze the sentiment Janie is expressing here. What does it suggest about her character and the story to come?

Chapters 2 - 4: Analysis, Synthesis:

Read "Chapter VII: the Mother's Struggle" from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which includes the episode of Eliza's flight to freedom. Then write a well-organized essay in which you examine the similarities between this episode and Nanny's account of her life as a slave and her escape. To what extent do the similarities between the two stories seem to be intentional? If intentional, to what purpose does Hurston employ this allusion?

Chapters 2 - 4: Analysis:

Consider the last paragraph of Chapter 3, beginning with "So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time..." In a well-organized essay, analyze Hurston's use of language and imagery, how it helps define Janie's character development, and how it prepares the reader for the next turn of the story.

Chapters 5 - 9: Analysis, Synthesis:

In a well-organized essay, examine the story of Matt Bonner's mule as a metaphor for slavery. What does it suggest about human nature, cruelty, and kindness? Analyze the implicit irony in the metaphor.

Chapters 5 - 9: Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis:

Read the paragraph in Chapter 6 that begins "She wasn't petal-open anymore with him..."

In a well-organized essay, examine how, in this one paragraph, Hurston sums up the changed nature of the marriage between Janie and Joe. Include an analysis of the word choice, imagery, and tone and how the reader is made to feel toward both characters in this brief section.

Chapters 5 - 9: Analysis, Synthesis:

Write a thoughtful and well-supported essay in which you consider the full arc of Janie and Joe's relationship from a feminist perspective. What is Hurston saying about relations between men and women, the difference between male and female perspectives, and about marriage in general?

Chapters 10 - 14: Analysis, Synthesis:

Write a thoughtful and well supported essay in which you examine the similarities and differences among the major male characters in the novel: Tea Cake, Joe Starks, Logan Killicks. Are Hurston's male characters as fully developed as her female characters? To what extent are they characters in their own right as opposed to devices with which to develop and reveal Janie's character arc?

Chapters 10 - 14: Synthesis, Evaluation:

Examine Janie's character and character arc critically; consider the life choices she has made and how they have affected her as a woman. Then write a thoughtful and well-supported essay in which you explore the extent to which Janie represents a feminist figure or role model.

Chapters 15 - 20: Reader Response, Synthesis, Evaluation:

Consider Hurston's portrayal of the hurricane and its aftermath in light of recent natural disasters, most particularly Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti. In a thoughtful and well-structured essay, explore the relevance and resonance of these chapters to the modern world.

Chapters 15 - 20: Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation:

In a thoughtful, well-supported essay, examine the contribution of Hurston's frequent use of nature imagery, metaphors, and symbols to her theme. 🍷



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Their Eyes Were Watching God

CHAPTER 1

Comprehension

1. How is the protagonist introduced in this chapter, and what are we told about her?

2. What recent life changing experience do we know Janie has had from the first three paragraphs?

3. What is the relationship between Janie and Phoeby, and how is it important to the story?

Reader Response

1. What is your first impression of Phoeby? Why?

2. Why do you think Janie has returned to town wearing overalls?

Their Eyes Were Watching God

CHAPTERS 2 - 4

Comprehension

1. What do we learn about Janie's childhood in Chapter 2?

2. How does Janie first realize she is different from the other children?

3. What incident brings about the end of Janie's childhood, and what is the result?

4. What do we learn of the grandmother's history?

5. How does Janie adjust to married life?

6. What is her husband's feeling toward her?

7. What is the key surprise about Joe's character?

Their Eyes Were Watching God

CHAPTERS 5 - 9

Comprehension

1. What does Joe do for Janie at the beginning of Chapter 5 that we've never witnessed anyone do for her before? How does it show his regard for her?

2. What is Joe's first accomplishment as Mayor? How does he bond the populace to him with this act?

3. How does Janie respond to her new role as Mayor's wife? Cite a key passage.

4. List some of Joe's behaviors toward Janie that hurt, disenchant, even anger her.

5. What is the motive behind Joe's refusal to eat anything cooked by Janie, or to allow her into his sick room? What does it indicate?

6. At the beginning of Chapter 9, how does Janie express her independence?

7. What challenge to Janie's independence does her widowhood present?

Their Eyes Were Watching God

CHAPTERS 10 - 14

Comprehension

1. What immediately bonds Janie and Tea Cake when he's introduced in Chapter 10?

2. What does Tea Cake do for Janie that we have never seen anyone do for her before? Why is this significant to both his character and the plot?

3. What is the turning point for Janie in her attitude toward Tea Cake?

4. Why does Janie leave town with Tea Cake?

5. Why does Janie pin the two hundred dollars to her dress, and keep it secret from Tea Cake? What does this suggest?

6. How does Tea Cake test Janie after they marry? What do they both learn?

7. How does the Everglades represent a different kind of life for Janie?

Their Eyes Were Watching God

CHAPTERS 15 - 20

Comprehension

1. Why does Nunkie upset Janie so much in Chapter 15?

2. How does Mrs. Turner distinguish herself from the other residents of the Everglades?

3. How does Tea Cake give Mrs. Turner a comeuppance?

4. What is the first intimation of the hurricane, and why does it not concern most of the inhabitants?

5. How are Tea Cake and Janie separated in Chapter 19, and why is it possible?

6. What, in terms of Janie's story, is most significant about the hurricane?
